

Die Wis #12

SAPS 67-APRIL '64

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THE VIEW FROM THE SAVOY HOTEL

NOTICE: To His Excellency Mr. Robert Alderson

As regards the affair of July the 21st, I believe the following might be of some interest to yourself and your office. I trust that this shall end the matter to everyone concerned.

The following was in a sealed envelope by an oddly dirty and abused type writer of English manufacture.

(see enclosure)

(enclosure):

ST. PETERSBURG, JULY 21st, 1903

Jack London, for COLLIERS MAGAZINE

Two years ago you could just see the top of the Winter Palace and the grey stone of the Defense Ministry from this balcony. You could smell the fresh water of the Baltic and reflect upon the serenity of the elms and thickset black oaks, dozing in the summer breeze. The Avenue deFournard perhaps resounded to the click-clack of a passing carriage or the raucous cries of a vendor of fresh cold ice cream or ripe melon.

All was peaceful and calm, the well-dressed citizenry walking in the streets and sporting hellos to familiar figures in the passing four-ender carriages. The walks and carriages were thick with braid and flashy uniforms of green and white and silver edging, the flash of a red-tabbed general coming less often.

An occasional troika would lumber past, some white-moustachioed general or ballet star sitting quietly in the back seat. Up front the red-liveried coachman and footmen prodded the horses into a gentle even trot and sat staring solemnly ahead.

Far away the river shimmered in the heat, perhaps the passing smoke of a lighter marring the cloudless Russian summer sky.

Despite the still-new rationing, things weren't scarce in St. Petersburg yet. The war was that frightful thing far to the south and the west. And maybe the fact that you couldn't get material to make a new gown or couldn't get any butter. And maybe it was the little youths and aged men in their rusty bicycles, pedalling up and down the streets with their packets of telegrams to be delivered to the daughters and wives and fathers and sons and cousins of those who gave the ultimate for Mother Russia on some distant Austrian hill.

The war was those constant processions of mourners, clad in black, and dancing in the streets in their sorrow. Inside the dark smoky churches, gaily painted but smoke beebegrimed ikons gazed solemnly down upon scenes of tears and wailing voices. Inside the bearded priest-hood swirled their smouldering containers of incense and chanted to the somber God who left them always in this vale of tears and anguish.

There is such a church near this hotel. It's shattered green dome must have echoed to the incessant repetitive chants of this dark-robed priesthood and witnessed its daily procession of mourners and curious and fatalistic.

Daily its bearded mutterers swept the wooden floor boards with their lengthy cassocks and swirled and cried out with great moaning and gnashing of teeth and lamentations.

St. Petersburg two years ago was also this very hotel and Sir Alan Felix-Hoch commenting that the Rskov red wine was cloudy and uncertain.

Here in this hotel, perhaps on this very balcony, the British Ambassador cried for the speedy demise of the enemies of their crown's. And Nicholas vom Romanov, Father of All The Russias, set down to dine with the British Ambassador.

The newspaper accounts of that meeting simply state that Sir Alan was a most gracious host and promised speedy British aid for the ripening holocaust to the south.

Today Sir Alan is supposedly in seclusion at his family estate near Prentiss, resigned from the Foreign Department over the treachery of the Liberal govournement. While Nicholas vom Romanov sleeps uneasily if at all in the ancient Ivan wing of the Paul Palace. The gracious tall Czarina of 1901 is large with child and resting at the Red Palace in Kiev.

Today Titania and Olga play together by themselves, their sister lying not half a mile from where I sit, hidden behind a dusty white marble sepsechule. And if the coming child is a boy, it is doubtful if he shall ever inherit the mace and globe of the Tsars of old. Five years hence there may no longer be a Mother Russia.

Today the issue is in doubt. Today St. Petersburg is still burning.

There are no triokas on the Avenue deFournard this hot summer day. The trees are few and far between, the British having used them for firewood during this past winter.

Instead a steady rain of soot and ash mars this broad avenue and the Winter Palace is visible, if you wish to call it that, by the occasional lock of flames from what must be the right direction. It is impossible to see far in this perpetual pall of smoke and soot and drifting ash.

The Russian uniforms present today are loaded with neither braid nor the solemn dignity of high position.

The Russian uniforms and soldiers in St. Petersburg today are characterized by dirty green uniforms with blanket rolls on their backs and long dirty rifles in their hands. Their bayonets are over a foot long and they are serious men with serious business on their minds. They are seemingly unaware of the haphazard bodies scattered hither and yon, some clad in Russian green or dirty white or British brown. Serious men, they say, deal only with serious matters. And obviously someone who is dead is not serious at all anymore.

Sir Alan is a sea and many miles away, now. But a Lance Corporal Scott, Hampshire Greens, was here last night. He's out in the hall now, along with the bit of tuft which I suppose was the back of his head before he ran into that unknown enemy which left him here in this room..

The sniper up on the fourth floor has opened up again and a passing squad is peppering the hotel facade with .378 caliber bullets and much squeaky Russian invective. By the sounds this squad is passing on towards some unknown and no doubt important (to them) objective. Leaving this unknown British sniper with a whole skin at present and not much of a future.

For St. Petersburg is sealed off. That much is obvious. Before I left 4th Army HQ last night, the last British counter-attack

from Szverdolosk had been mangled rather badly. Yesterday the artillery fire from the north ceased to come in steady while that of the Baltic Fleet has continued to thump overhead uninterrupted. One cruiser, the Olympia, is reportedly half-way up the river and firing point-blank into the British strong-point of the Ministry of Communications building.

At least thus my informer, a Lieutenant of Engineers informed me. Like most of the combatants here this week-end, he cannot understand why anyone, even a reporter, would wish to go around the city unescorted. Reporters it seems are supposed to write eye-witness accounts after the fighting is over.

But then, maybe the fighting in the city won't be over very soon after all. Szverdolsk is still in British hands, which means the entire Murmansk-St. Petersburg railroad is still serving them. Vyborg and Narva remain in British hands and Riga has fallen to the Scots.

The Baltic Fleet is now itself penned into the Gulf of Bothnia around Kronstadt. And the Russian Army is under orders to grab British arms and ammunition and use them wherever possible.

But today St. Petersburg burns.

When Peter the Great built his city on the marshes, he intended it to be a window on the West. Now his window to the West has become an entry-port for the invading well-supplied legions of deceitful albiion.

The firing seems to be getting closer, down from the south. A group of cossacks just rode past, heading south and silent in their anger and weariness. The cossack is considered a gay carefree chap with a ready laugh, long mustachios and strange-draped long coats on their frames. These cossacks look rather like mounted peasants, grimy and drab-clothed, rifles slung across their backs and issue caps on their heads.

Now comes diminutive ulcerated pack horses dragging little carriages with machine-guns mounted on them, behind a sheet of plate steel covering. A panting group of Russian gun crews pant past at a staggering cant. The deathly still sooty heat makes their backs black with sweat and their faces black with grime and powder smoke. One little bearded fellow is bringing up the rear, staggering under the load of two ammunition cases. I wonder if the sniper sees him?

Even as I asked the sharp crack spun the straggler around and deposited him on the sidewalk. Now he is resting from his heavy load. Now he'll rest forever. He's lying there, legs draped over those boxes and gazing up at the sky, as if to receive a sun-tan through all the smoke. He's almost touching a brown-coated Englishman who also seems to be seeking out Father Sol from behind the grey drifting miasmia.

Early this morning three prisoners were taken out of one of the buildings on this side of the street and stood in the center of the road. The Russians played with them with their bayonets for a while and then the yellow-capped Lieutenant started questioning them.

At least I suppose he was questioning them. He seemed to be asking something. But evidently his English was inadequate or his invective finally worked him up to a boiling pitch or they refused to divulge any information.

So then the Lieutenant started kicking one and kicked him until he fell into the street and continued even then. He kept kicking him in the head until I could see the grey and red on his boots and then he stopped.

It was almost as if he was single-handedly attempting to eradicate a monumental hate, to pay off in full a debt of blood.

I wonder if he came from St. Petersburg?

After this, he had two privates in once-white uniforms find a tin of petrol and poured it over the remaining pair of struggling Englishmen. Once aflame one of the British got up and ran down the street, twirling around and around and around like a ballet dancer and taking giant leaps, arms windmilling over his head, a cloud of flame enveloping him at every step, a hollow hoarseness echoing and echoing again up and down the street and across the park long after he had stumbled and lay still, smoking evilly in the sooty morning air.

And I hear tales of Welsh Guards machine-gunning Russian prisoners and throwing them into the river with their legs and arms tied and of Russians crucifying Englishmen by nailing them to the crude wooden walls that constitute the largest number of private dwellings in St. Petersburg.

This seems to be some sort of horrible unrealistic impossible norm this week-end. Amid an Inferno-like atmosphere of flames and smoke and soot and blackened ruins of buildings, the participants in this horrible senseless battle are seemingly rehearsing for some infinitely more horrible gotterdamerung to come. As if this horrible mind-wrenching disaster of death and horror were only some sort of prelude to some impossible Coming Attraction.

Can it be? Is there worse to come?

Such are the "incalculable benefits" that Chamberlain proclaimed would come to England as a result of this most deceitful treachery. Such are the rewards of this back-stabbing switch of allies that will bring "Peace and Harmony" to Europe. If successful in this most blatantly imperialistic of ventures, a century will not be enough to bring peace to the conquered provinces of Mother Russia. The manpower and resources of a century will be needed to maintain a British rule over this land.

Such are the benefits.

You reading this article cannot really comprehend the hate that is flourishing like some terrible hot creature brooding in the low sky above us. In your stuffed chairs or cool porches you cannot feel the heat or see the sweat or the sticky pools of human life seeping out onto the street.

You can't hear the big shells passing overhead like nothing so much as boxcars being flung the sky sideways. Or duck the bullet that you consciously realize has already passed you, your reflexes being ill-equipped to deal with the scurrying speed of those projectiles of death.

You can't feel the grittiness of the sharded and shredded glass over everything you touch or step on, or acquire the callousness with which you quickly come to view the ever-present dead.

These inanimate piles of protoplasm and cloth quickly come to mean only an inconvenient smell and a possible source of disease and therefore something to be avoided if possible.

Tonight I'm to join the funereal procession back to Moscow, a train of mourners and friends and enemies and soldiers of the now late Prince Alexi. Alexi will no doubt be given a full State funeral, complete with backwards-facing rifles and a eulogy by the Grand Metropolitan of Moscow.

So, tonight I'll join my sparse neutral comrades and allied reporters and listen to the clicks on the repaired track back to Moscow. We'll swap tales of how close we each came to death and opinions of how long the Russians can hold out or how long the

British can hold out or rumours of Germany signing an armistice in order to save its threatened position in Burgundy or news of how the fighting is going in the Balkans. Probably M. Millern of Paris-March will be there and we'll each bemoan American neutrality.

And we'll each be trying to put away into the very back of our memories what we have seen and heard and smelt here in St. Petersburg this weekend. We won't succeed, however.

The ways of war are harsh and implacable here on the broad Russian plains and forests.

Shells are landing across the street in the park now. Yes, here come some British troops, no doubt trying futiely to reach some haven of safety in this most miserable of cities. There seems to be a veritable horde of British streaming across the park grounds and the shells are pacing them like some conscientious broom, making sure that they do not stray from their path like bad little children often do. The varied-pitched moan of the shells is coming closer now and I'd better end my report for now.

As ever, I remain,

Your Reporter From Russia,

-Jack London-

(addendum)

As you can see, the manuscript makes absolutely no sense at all, unless it is the sort of sense that an irrational piece of fictional writing might have.

Naturally we have checked into the matter a good deal and have reached a number of conclusions. First off, the passport was indeed genuine. But as you noted, it was not issued by your State Department.

Similarly, the pass signed by the Tsar was so perfect as to stand up to exacting tests. Yet again it was never issued by neither the War Ministry nor signed by the Tsar.

How he arrived in the Royal Suite and from whence came the mysterious explosion has not yet been discovered. However the work of anarchists is suspected.

At least one Inspector of Security has voiced the opinion that this pseudonymous Jack London was a deranged dupe of a gang of bomb throwers. Who then somehow or other took the bomb somewhere else and exploded it.

No remains of the bomb have been found, but then the damage to that room was rather extensive.

There is an Alan Felix-Hoch, by the way. He is the manager of one of the more successful coal-mining areas in the Department of Lancashire and is a valued member of the Royalist Party and a good Napoleonist. However he has never been to Russia.

Of course the idea of the French allowing the English to create an Army of their own is beyond comprehension, so the fictional tale of Russians fighting English soldiers is ridiculous. We wonder what sort of a world his mind conceived, one where Napoleon XII probably ruled not from Paris, I suppose.

Please inform us if you ever find anyone, a reporter, known as Jack London. Until then I remain yours,

The Prefecture of Police